

## **Cutting Paths, Singing. Approaching *sendas* (1992) for Seven Winds and Piano by Graciela Paraskevaídis<sup>1</sup>**

Wolfgang Rüdiger

### **1. A chord and its consequences**

A chord as a shock – a sudden tutti attack out of nothingness, shrill, sharp, piercing, cutting, like a slash through one's eye (greetings from Buñuel), an “eye chord” long resonating in the piano, as if paralysed. The piece beginning with three rests, the striking blow not until the fourth beat, notated in the wind parts as an *appoggiatura sempre sfz*, the paradox of a grace note on the beat in metrical no man's land, and on the other hand calculated exactly: an eight part chord held for eight beats in the piano, fading; four notes in each hand of the piano, seven of these notes doubled in the wind parts. Trombone and bassoon B-flat and E, horn and trumpet F and B-natural – this is the symmetrical tritone bracket from the piano's left hand. Clarinet, oboe and flute C, E-flat and A – this layering of minor thirds from the diminished seventh chord in the right hand is missing the F-sharp, which thus remains “fresh” for the piano repetitions leading up to the next entrance of the winds, this time as double tutti chords in bar 4.

Put into a row, these eight notes amount to two four-note groups a minor third apart: A-B-flat – B-natural – C / E-flat – E – F – F-sharp. Or in a different order: B-flat – B-natural – C – E-flat / E – F – F-sharp – A: tetrachords with symmetrical intervals. This reveals complex compositional thought and organisation, not only in the form of the row, but also in the intervallic relationships. The layering of two semitones and a minor third, resulting in a tritone, is what characterizes the acoustic physiognomy and the further progression of *sendas I*: B-flat – E, B-natural – F, C – F-sharp, and E-flat – A are the four tritone brackets building up that

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piercing first chord, brackets that are to be undergoing various filtering and layering processes, whilst remaining fixed in their respective registers.

I. "pero nosotros miramos con miedo el camino que pasa"

① (♩ = ca. 84 MM. cortante / schneidend)

Flauta  
Oboe  
Clarinete en Si  
Fagot  
Trompeta  
Corno en Fa  
Trombón  
Piano

① (♩ = ca. 84 MM. cortante / schneidend)

Sample Notation 1: *Sendas I*, T. 1-6: Basic material and emotional content.

This is the complete tonal material in the first of four “paths” (*sendas*) by the Argentinian-Uruguayan composer, Graciela Paraskevaïdis, commissioned by “Ensemble Aventure”, premiered on the 30<sup>th</sup> October, 1992 during the ensemble’s Latin American New Music Festival in Freiburg. The

Grundmaterial [...] sowie seine Auswahl, seine Kombination, seine Artikulation, seine intervallische, klangfarbliche, zeitliche, räumliche, rhythmische und dynamische Organisation beruhen auf einigen wenigen Präsenzen, hartnäckig beschränkt und obsessiv in sich wiederholt,

the basic material – its choice, combination and articulation, its intervallic, tone-colour, chronological, spacial, rhythmical and dynamical organisation – is based on very few “presences”, unyieldingly limited and obsessively

repeated (composer's commentary). Each of the four "paths" bears an epigraph quoted from the poem *tratos* (1983/1984) by the exiled Argentinian poet Juan Gelman, in *sendas I: pero nosotros miramos con miedo el camino que pasa*, in English, "but we fearfully look at the road passing by".

As in other compositions,<sup>2</sup> Graciela Paraskevaïdis refers here to images used by the poet, who as a victim of the Argentinian military dictatorship and creator of poems of resistance, hope and utopia (Montanaro 2006), had first hand experience of the themes dealt with in the lines. Even without knowledge of quote and cycle title, *sendas I* evokes exactly this imagery. After the stroke of lightening from the beginning, the music seems frozen by shock and fear, until after the two bars of fading, the F-sharp quintuplet repetitions in the piano provide the energetic impulse to the twin chords taken from the beginning. Paralysis transforms into mobility, passivity turns into action, a possible pathway appears.

## 2. Attacks and action – Cutting techniques

Although this interpretation can be backed up by the formal construction of the first few bars (and at the same time may have its roots in the composer's biography)<sup>3</sup> – the composer distances herself vehemently from a direct classification of her piece as a synaesthetic composition of fearful "looking" and "passing". "The quotes from Gelman's poem are meant only as symbolic elements and carry no descriptive or programmatic intentions whatever", she writes in her commentary, and further, "Each path has its own character: I. cutting, II. singable, III. aggressive, IV. danceable".

These indications are to be respected and can be implemented at the same time. They don't contradict our previous interpretations, but rather confirm the direction of our path. For nothing other than a symbolic-affective, analytic interpretation of the first six bars has been attempted. Programmatic music describes events; a "symbolic" approach analyses compositional procedures used to express ideas, gestures and emotions: harmonies and articulation, blocks of sound and textures, interfaces and

2 For example in *libres en el sonido presos en el sonido* (1997) for flute, clarinet, violin, Cello and piano, in *dos piezas para piano* (2001) and in *Soy de un país donde* (2002) for trumpet in C, horn, tenor/bass-trombone und bass-tuba in C.

3 Alluded to by the composer in a conversation with the author, though discretion prevents the disclosure of details.

layers, durations and dynamics, etc., which in turn can be examined for their physical/emotional, intellectual and social content (an acceptable method, particularly in regard to such a determinedly physical and critically communicative composer as Paraskevaïdis). And in reference to the piece's title and tone, the expressive content can be labelled: Paths, cutting; possibly meaning: cutting off, cutting into, incising, cutting through; but also breaking into, interrupting, contradicting; or even operating – surgical music on all compositional levels, propounding: through drastic events, that shock and paralyse – be it existentially, socially, privately or politically (for Paraskevaïdis not irreconcilable differences) – energy for new courses of action can be generated – a feasible interpretation of the opening. From a compositional point of view, this is manifested in the articulatory and dynamical sharpness of the two part chord, split up between piano and winds, in the antagonism of short, loud attacks and the long, fading resonance, in the contrasting proportions of at first 1:8 (one complex chord with 8 beats resonating) and 5:1 (quintuplet repetitions of a single note for the duration of one beat) – this being the stimulating impulse at the end of bar 3, subsequently leading into the proportion 2:11 (the chord repetition in the winds with 11 beats sustained by the piano's pedal). Expressed differently: a short point of the most extreme activity is followed by a long period of stillness and vice versa.

The image shows a musical score for measures 7-12 of 'Sendas I'. The score is for a full orchestra and piano. The instruments listed are Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (Fag.), Trumpet (Tpt.), Horn (Cor.), Trombone (Tbn.), and Piano (Pno.). Measures 7-12 show a dotted rhythm and Milonga pattern. The piano part features a complex chord with 8 beats resonating, followed by a quintuplet of single notes for the duration of one beat. The wind parts (Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, Trumpet, Horn, Trombone) also feature complex chords and patterns.

Sample Notation 2: *Sendas I*, T. 7-12: Dotted rhythm and Milonga pattern.

In the second section, starting with the upbeat to bar 7, a new sort of “cutting” arises, bringing with it a new motive, or rather a new idea. The separation of left and right hand in the piano (tritone bracket in the one and minor third layering in the other) combined with a dotted rhythm, in this case taking on the form and function of a concentrated charge of energy, metaphorically: a flexibly elastic, tension-filled, even threatening drive, provokingly inciting a “passing” in the sense of Gelman’s verse. The rigorous tempo, quarter note equals 84, doesn’t come into its own until here. And the dotted figure can be understood as “tensión” in the widest sense of the word: a representation of body tension with strictness and structure.<sup>4</sup> Established somewhere between the ceremonial and the sensational, the significance of the dotted rhythm includes such opposed concepts as dance and dirge, processional music and songs of protest, lullabies and songs of resistance. A prime example of the latter, an appeal for a change in course of action, is Hanns Eisler’s *Solidaritätslied*, referred to by critical composers of the *Rio de la Plata* area<sup>5</sup> (5), in which the biting dotted rhythm is also discernible (although in a slower tempo).

Sample Notation 3: *Sendas I*, T. 19-24.

4 Coriún Aharonián in a conversation with the author on August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011 in Montevideo.

5 A striking example is Coriún Aharonián’s Eisler-Hommage *Una canción* (1998) for flute, clarinet, viola, cello and piano.

What's more, the forceful dotting of the divided tension-chord leads straight into a rhythmical motive, that appears to be a cypher of Latin American identity: eighth note – quarter note – eighth note – quarter note is the rhythmic pattern commencing in bar 9 (to return in bar 22 in the bassoon), that is to say, two groups of three eighth notes, not thought of and felt as syncopation, but rather as the concept of a “rhythmischen Ternarität in Opposition zu einer Binarität”, ternary rhythm as opposed to a binary one, characteristic of Latin American music (Aharonián 1991: 61). This rhythmic gesture can be regarded as the basis of the Milonga – “pie de milonga”: “Este gesto melódico, que es probablemente el núcleo central de la milonga bailable, aparece también en expresiones musicales de distintas regiones de América” (Aharonián 2007: 35). In search of a cultural identity beyond traditional European models, where the primarily binary divisions have a “square” musical “body”, the elastic milonga rhythmic pattern 3:3 or 3:3:2 (the main motive of *sendas IV: dancing*) with its “Gefühl der Vorausnahme oder Verzögerung der rhythmischen Unterstützung im musikalischen Fluss”, its feeling of rhythmical anticipation and delay in the musical flow (Aharonián 1991: 61) could be designated as the nucleus typical of Latin American composition, principally along the Atlantic coast.

IV. “y la libertad se convierte en un dolor en el cuerpo”

① (♩ = ca. 92 MM. bailable / tanzend)

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\* percutir con ambos pulgares sobre el borde de la tapa cerrada del teclado, en el centro.  
/auf der Mitte des Klavierdeckels mit beiden Daumen schlagen.

Sample Notation 4: *Sendas IV*, T. 1-6.

However in *sendas I* this identity cypher remains in the background, inconspicuously introduced, not taking on its full dancing form until the fourth movement, after having gone through a whole process of cutting, singing, and violence – eloquent evidence of the historically reflecting, self-critical use of material typical of Paraskevaïdis. Her almost physically critical works are full of clashing contradictions: the familiar and the strange, European and Latin American musical thought, anger and tenderness, heights and depths, generating a musical dialectic as an insoluble, solified contradiction (“Dialektik als unauflösbarer, zuständlich gewordener Widerspruch”, Nyffeler 2002: 22).

The following synopsis of the formal sections may substantiate this statement.

### 3. Frames between “statics” and dynamics

*Sendas I* can be divided into three sections, more exactly into three form blocks, or frames, of static character but nonetheless, in a constant state of change, the thematic material being filtered and concentrated, alternating between short attacks, long sounds, repetitions and rhythmic figuration, introducing new parameters, splitting elements apart and building up polyphonic layers, in short, “presences” obsessively repeated and varied at the same time. The first one generates the next one, changes but remains faithful to itself – dialectic composing *par excellence*. To anticipate one of the results: although identical, the chord in bar 26 is not the same as it was in bar 1, but rather a carefully worked-out objective, whose gradual fade out is the long-prepared result of a stringent development.

**Frame 1 Bars 1-6:** Cutting tutti chord sfz, staccato – pedal; freezing – loss of energy – stillness; Energy-filled repetitive impulse F-sharp" (quintuplets – 5) – activating “seeing”, “fear”, paving the way.

**Frame 2 Bars 7-15:** Invigorating dotting and divided chord (9 x) – mi-longa cell;  
Bar 8 *Intensifying I*: Chord attack + chord in dotted rhythm + extension in polyrhythmic layers / repetition texture 8:6;

Tutti chord held in the pedal F-sharp" – rhythmical formation with change of register and permutation – F-sharp"-repetition (9x) with pedal – long note in the upper woodwinds – all further development cut off by the piano chord with delayed "filter-shadow" in the repetitive structure 7:3:4 (upper woodwinds) – GP;

"passing" (movement), inactivity, increase in density of action and energetic impulses, piercing basic chord split up into its possibilities, variation of states and "presences" with the same basic material.

The musical score for Sample Notation 5, measures 13-18, is presented for a full orchestra and piano. The score is divided into three systems. The first system includes Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), and Bassoon (Fag.). The second system includes Trumpet (Tpt.), Horn (Cor.), and Trombone (Thu.). The third system is for the Piano (Pno.). The piano part features a prominent pedal point on F-sharp, with a dynamic marking of *p* (piano) at the beginning and *ff* (fortissimo) at the end. The woodwinds and brass parts show a variety of rhythmic patterns and dynamics, including *mf* (mezzo-forte) and *ff*. The score is marked with measure numbers 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18.

Sample Notation 5: *Sendas I*, T. 13-18.

**Frame 3 Bars 16-30:** Continuation of the dotted rhythm (8x) with crescendo + repetition (3 + 5);

New energetic impulses / intensifying through dynamics and tremolo;

Bar 18 *golden mean* – Bar 19 ff. *Intensifying II*: extreme density of action, dynamics, energy, with interference between piano and winds – polyphony of events, gestures, elements: short – long, repeated,



rhythmicity – dotted rhythm + milonga formula in the bassoon and trombone;  
 diverse connections, “paths” (solo, duo, quartet, tutti) – cut: piano chord bar 23 – bar 24 f. *Intensifying III*: wind crescendo up to the tutti chord bar 26 – ringing on – silence.

#### 4. Attempting an interpretation

The summary shows an immense increase in intensity during the piece’s 3 form blocks in only one and a half minutes – and an extreme gesticulative expressiveness, that results from clear structural thinking. The well calculated scheme of lengths, proportions and bar numbers should be pointed out: the obsessive repetitions of the dotted figures and polyrhythmic repetitive textures seem almost serially organized. As becomes apparent from the synopsis, they can be found on a scale of 1 to 9, alluding to Fibonacci, as in the note divisions: 2:3:5:8 in bars 16/17. And the fact that the golden mean of the movement coincides numerically with the number of syllables in the epitaph taken from Gelman’s poem is surely not so much coincidence, as an expression of a structural perception, possibly unconscious.

More importantly however, out of this structural awareness a great deal of expression, a message, an “own project” (Adolfo Colombres) emerges. According to our analysis of the whole and of the details, we can formulate the following: out of the brilliant beginning, with its complex impulse and with the following resonance, the impulse, which seems to stab into the listener’s eyes and ears, and scares but simultaneously stimulates, Graciela Paraskevaïdis uses a structural “coming and going” – an increase and decrease of energy, silence and fullness, cuts and layers, destruction and concentration of sound – to produce a highly expressive, dialectic music, a music of states and processes somewhere between the rigidity of shock and a glimpse into the future. “but we fearfully look at the road passing by” – one path leads back, another leads on. Whilst Paraskevaïdis energizes her conceptual denial of the traditional idea of development or discourse (a typical stylistic element in certain trends of the Latin American avant-garde) with intensive bouts of stimulating “body”, and uses associative developmental logic in order to obtain varied appear-

ances of her thematic “presences”, she creates a new, personal music, less of an “archaic” but rather of *anarchistic structure*: the paradox of a musical-physical sculpture, standing still and moving at the same time, and carving a path toward manifold actions of solidarity. So the first “path” ends in a similar but again completely different openness compared with the biting opening chord: the destination- and transition-chord leads through a crescendo into an “angespannte Stille als provokanter Ausdruck von Widerstand”, a tense silence, which in itself is the provocative expression of resistance (Nyffeler 2002: 22).

The fact that Paraskevaïdis’ music of resistance not only involves powerful, active even aggressive traits, as in *sendas I* and *III*, but can take on many different guises, for instance melodic singing (*II*) and dance-like effortlessness (*IV*), is the best proof of her “challenging poetry of relentlessness and extremes – alternately lyrical, oppressive, playful as well as violent” (“anspruchsvolle Poetik der Strenge und der Extreme – abwechselnd lyrisch, bedrückend, spielerisch sowie gewaltig”, Corrado 2006: 2). A short look at the second movement should verify this.

## 5. Between heaven and hell

The tonal material of *sendas II* is just as sparse and also derived from the basic chord from the first movement, though in contrast to *sendas I*, it does without the biting tonal complexity in favour of melodic mellowness of an oboe/trumpet sound mixture, at first with the low E in the bassoon (in the second section with the addition of trombone and horn). Out of the merging of timbre-related solo instruments arises a modal sonority-melody with delicate unison meeting points and decorations, tritone tensions and semitone frictions, legato lines and leaps of sixth or seventh – seemingly a utopian gesture of the purest beauty. The tonal material is reminiscent of the roaming modality of Eastern European folksong, wavering between Lydian on C with an augmented fourth F-sharp, and Dorian on C with the perfect fifth F, minor third E-flat and minor seventh B-flat.

II. "preguntamos a qué otro infierno conducirá"

① (♩ = ca. 60 MM. cantable / singend)

Ob.  
Tpt.  
Fag.

Sample Notation 6: *Sendas II*, T. 1-11.

In bar 2 and 3 a Lydian-Mixolydian phrase with augmented fourth – F-sharp – and minor seventh – B-flat – is outlined, the so-called acoustical scale or “Podhalanská” scale used so often by Béla Bartók and Erwin Schulhoff. The yearning melodic upswing and falling tritone, the intertwinings and suspensions of the melodic lines, the modal tonal repertoire and related tone-colours producing amalgamation to a high degree, a utopian beauty in extreme contrast to the splitting sounds and activating gestures of the first movement (and possibly founded in the “kunstvollen melismatischen Gesang”, the artistically melodious singing of the Greek Orthodox liturgy, one of the composer’s early and treasured experiences; compare Nyffeler 2002: 20).

But that’s not all. The development of the wide melodic arc becomes increasingly chromatic – reaching total chromaticism in bar 11. Underlaid is an irregular ostinato pulse on the bassoon E, interspaced with rests. In bars 18/19 the trombone and horn reinforce the dark pulsation in eighth notes, dotted notes, half-note triplets, quintuplets etc. causing a predominance of low notes, which in turn influences the melody, freezing it on single notes (F-sharp – E, G – F-sharp).

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system covers measures 43 to 48, and the second system covers measure 49. The instruments are listed on the left: Fl. (Flute), Ob. (Oboe), Cl. (Clarinet), Fag. (Bassoon), Tpt. (Trumpet), Cor. (Cor), Tbn. (Tuba), and Pno. (Piano). The piano part is written for both hands. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, beams, and dynamic markings like *p* (piano) and *via sord.* (via sordina). The piano part features a continuous eighth-note pattern in the left hand and a melodic line in the right hand. The woodwinds and brass parts have various melodic and harmonic lines. The score ends with a repeat sign in measure 49.

Sample Notation 7: *Sendas II*, 43-49.

From bar 43 on the piano adds its low E to the bass pulsation, and with its E<sup>'''</sup> it assists the flute and clarinet in pinpointing high E<sup>'''</sup>s, a silver lining on the horizon, and with dotted rhythms, sparks of hopefulness that give way to the outburst of rage, the tumultuous third movement.

III. "preferimos infierno en mano a cien volando"

①  $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 112 \text{ MM. agresivo / aggressiv}$

Fl.  $ff$

Ob.  $ff$

Cl.  $ff$

Fag.  $ff$

Tpt.  $ff$

Cur.  $ff$

Tbn.  $ff$

Pno.  $ff$

Sample Notation 8: *Sendas* III, T. 1-6.

“preguntamos a qué otro infierno conducirá”, is the epitaph from Gelman’s poem for *sendas II*, we ask to what other inferno it [the path from the first movement] will lead. Beauty freezes to shame over its own appearance and turns away in anger – this beautiful line could be interpreted as an arch spanning the open space between heaven and hell, between Utopia and restlessness – and shows: “sendas” reflects the composer’s wide structural-emotional spectrum, a composer whose alert, passionate but still down-to-earth view of reality can create such highly expressive, moving works, full of tenderness and rage – works that are simultaneously models of solidarity and cooperation and at the same time formulate new possibilities for assimilating and transforming the world; which way? – on to new paths, cutting, singing, aggressive, dancing.

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